

Gladys Berejiklian On Euthanasia

With Ben Fordham on Radio 2GB - 5 September 2017

Introduction then

Ben –This is a tough one.

Gladys Berejiklian – It's an absolutely tough one and I really want to respond to your introduction and say that I am one of 93 voices and yes, I find this a very personally difficult issue to deal with but I want people to feel confident that I think this will be a very robust debate. I think there are members on all sides of the argument and for me personally there is no wrong or right answer on this but up to this point in time I find it difficult to allow the Bill to go through.

I feel we have amazing palliative care available and I appreciate that it doesn't work for every individual but what makes me most uncomfortable and what makes me feel that I can't support it is the notion that even if one person feels they've got no option but to do this because of pressure from family or because of pressure for being a burden or for whatever other reason. And 12 months is a long time, in so far as you don't know what health outcomes you might get over that period of time and I just feel for me it's a very difficult stretch to go from the system we have in place, where in fact, we have to accept that through palliative care physicians and specialists are already do assist people to be as comfortable as possible, especially at the later stages of their illness and all of us have had family and friends who have gone through this and I don't want to take away anyone's personal experience.

In fact, some of the letters I've received from my own constituents are absolutely heart-wrenching, people do open up and talk about their own personal experiences, absolutely heart-wrenching. I don't think it is fair that for any of us to cast judgement on how someone feels about this issue because it is very personal, we all come to it based on what we've seen in life and what we feel is the best thing to do. I don't feel it's my job to tell anybody else how to vote, it's not my job to tell anybody else how to feel, that's up to people themselves and I am certainly not going to sit here and condemn anybody for voting a certain way because it all comes down to how you feel and what your own personal experiences are.

Ben – So in your own personal experiences you would have seen people die a long, slow, painful death and there is nothing worse than when you are standing there watching and thinking, look, this person just wants to be out of here, they've lived a fruitful life, they are now not enjoying any quality of life and it's time for them to go. Why can't we say to those people look if that's your wish, if this is your desire, we're going to let you do it? Or are you saying that that is already happening anyway?

Gladys – Well, I think to a large extent that occurs and there are also many people unfortunately who don't have a terminal illness who have a very difficult quality of life and, for me personally, it's about what we can do to support people going through a difficulty, whether they have a chronic illness or a terminal illness and everybody's circumstances are different, I just don't like the idea of anyone feeling pressure or any circumstance which would ask them to take a proactive decision.

And Ben, we also know of cases and individual examples where people have been given a devastating prognosis but then seen them have a good quality of life beyond that timeframe. I am someone who is an eternal optimist in some ways and when someone says you've got 12 months you might end up with a few years and we've seen lots of examples of that as well. So again, I don't make this decision lightly and I don't do it in judgement to anybody.

Ben – I can hear that and I've got some sympathy for the position you are in, and as you say you are just one vote, you may be the NSW Premier but you are just one vote amongst many other votes. It is a hard one to say to someone, like look I would love to be able to assist you because you are clearly dying, you're on your last legs, you're in a lot of pain, you're being kept alive by some kind of machine and a lot of health care professionals but I can't allow you to do that because someone else out there who might do the wrong thing, there might be family members, or third parties out there who might abuse this system and encourage someone to end their life early for the wrong reasons. It's a hard argument to say to the person who is the decent person who is just dying and just wants to be relieved of their pain.

Gladys – Absolutely it is and I know that existing provisions exist, and we have all had Family members who have chosen not to be resuscitated or not to have artificial intervention, I mean you can take those decisions now. But Ben there is no easy answer to this and I'm grappling with it and even the fact that I can't support it doesn't mean that that decision doesn't weigh heavily on me.

Ben – Was there something along the way, I am interested and I read out that quote – “I'm traditionally someone who is quite progressive on social issues but that's a difficult one for me, I don't think I can support it”. And I must admit myself Premier, I've always been a supporter of voluntary euthanasia but I had a conversation with the former deputy Premier, John Watkins, who raised what I thought were some valid concerns when I spoke to him about assisted dying so I can understand. So have you had a bit of a switch? Have you had something that has happened that has made you think hang-on a moment maybe I am not as big a supporter as I once was?

Gladys – Well, I have always been someone who hasn't felt comfortable with voluntary assisted dying or euthanasia. I have never been someone who is comfortable with that. But at the same time, I've witnessed, as all of us have, I'm no exception, to the absolute pain and trauma that people go through towards the end of their life and that's why we've not made a secret of the fact that we, as a Government, we have invested more in palliative care. There's still more we need to do. But the fact and as you said, sometimes, unfortunately it is those who may do the wrong thing or pressure people who cause us to reflect on how we would vote. But again, I'm very pleased to stress that I am only one of 93 votes.

Ben - Understood.

Gladys – I want everybody to feel completely free. I've said to my colleagues, everyone should vote with their conscience, with their own personal experience, and not cast judgement on how people approach this issue because it is a real difficult one.

Ben – Alright, I can hear it coming straight from your heart and that's the way we like it. Thank you so much for joining us.

Ben's wrap up (in which he admits a family member was assisted to die)

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